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Poet Bharathi, touched with fire

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Abstract

Substance use among creative artists is very common. In this paper, such use by the great Tamil poet, Subramani Bharathi, is considered.

Keywords: Cannabis habit, opioid use, poet Bharathi

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” arising from “emotions recollected in tranquility” Wordsworth (1770–1850).

Poets and other creative artists have made works of immortality by their own genius. Many of them were habituated to the use of alcohol and other substances.[1] It must be borne in mind that there is no cause and effect relationship between genius and drug use.

In this article, it is proposed to consider the drug habits of the great Tamil poet Subramani Bharathi (1882–1921). His place in the Tamil literature is a unique one. In the words of Varadharajan Ramaswamy (Va. Ra.), his Boswellian biographer:

“In the poems of Bharathi - Do you want humour? Yes there is. Do you want sorrow? Sure. Do you want ecstasy? In excess. Fury? In abundance. Consolation? Volumes and volumes. Philosophy? Paragraph after paragraph. Why prolong? What is not here?”

Bharathi's contribution to the liberation struggle in the early decades of the 20th century, along with his fellow patriot V. O. Chidambaram Pillai (V.O.C.), both hailing from Tirunelveli district of the erstwhile Madras Presidency of colonial India, was monumental. His father Chinnaswamy Aiyar was an influential officer at the court of the Raja of Ettayapuram, which contained a number of Tamil intellectuals. The youngster's zest for Tamil literature and poetry and his quick-wittedness earned him the title “Bharathi.”

INITIATION INTO DRUG USE

After his father's death, he worked in the Raja's court as an official from 1902 up to 1904, and the Raja extended his patronage and cordiality to the young man. He was a favorite of the Raja, who was highly concerned about Bharathi's poor physique and advised him strongly to use “Puranathi Lehiyam,” an electuary containing considerable amounts of opium and ganja along with many ingredients. The Raja jocularly told him, “you look dyspeptic - after using this lehiyam you will swallow not only food but also

the container!” He also recommended “a ganja drink instead of ganga drink.” It was a licentious court and how much Bharathi followed the royal advice we cannot be sure. This is how he was initiated into the drug habit.

The Raja had sponsored the education of the youngster by sending him to Varanasi, where he studied in the Central Hindu College (Benares Hindu University did not exist then) and became proficient in Sanskrit and English.

After his father's death, his financial condition became precarious – he worked for a short while as a Tamil teacher in a Madurai school and then left for Madras where he joined (in 1904) the Nationalist Tamil daily *Swadesamithran*, which pursued a moderate rather than a radical course. Therefore, Bharathi started his own journal *India* in 1906 and published his fiery patriotic poems and blunt anti-colonial articles. His association with V. O. C. became more intimate, the latter floated his Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company in 1906. Bharathi helped him in getting contributions for shares in the company and donations. This landmark in the national history competed directly with the Imperial British traders who were irked by this audacious act. V. O. C. was subsequently involved in serious charges of sedition and conspiracy, which got him two life terms of rigorous imprisonment (as there was no place in the Andaman jails, V. O. C. spent his term at Cannanore and Coimbatore). In the Coimbatore jail, he was subjected to humiliation and physical torture – he was made to break stones under the harsh midday sun and kept in leg-restraints at all times and forced to operate the oil-press all by himself. These up and down life-events in his friend's life made Bharathi first ecstatic and then depressed, and resulted in two of his immortal poems:

“We will go for a walk on the silvery snowy mountain; We will sail all the western seas...” “Did we rear this plant [of liberty] with water? O God! We guarded it with tears; Would you allow it to wither? Great people are lying down in the horrid prison; Scholars are suffering from drawing the the oil press - don't you see?”

Bharathi's wish for liberty echoed in the lines “When will this thirst for liberty be quenched? When will this infatuation with slavery die?”

ABSTINENCE OR MINIMAL DRUG USAGE

When Bipin Chander Pal visited Madras in 1907, Bharathi organized a meeting at the Madras Marina Beach where foreign goods were consigned to flames for the first time in the Indian National Struggle. Simultaneously, his friend V. O. C. organized a similar meeting in his native town, Tuticorin. At the Surat Convention of the Indian National Congress in 1907, the split between the moderates and the extremists led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak occurred – Tilak was protected morally and physically by the team from Tamil Nadu led by Bharathi, V. O. C., Srinivasacharya and others. The British government was contemplating legal action against Bharathi. Then, his friends, who did not want an interruption in his nationalist and literary career (unlike V. O. C. who languished in jail from 1908 to 1912), advised him to take refuge in French-ruled Pondicherry. Bharathi then spent most of his life here (1908–1918), joined by Aurobindo and Tamil friends such as V. V. S. Aiyar, Va. Ra. and others. Most of his famous works were written here, in praise of Lord Krishna, Goddess Shakti and Lord Muruga of the Hindu pantheon, along with the vows of Draupadi, a dramatised version of the Mahabharata, and the Cuckoo's Melody and Gnana Ratha (Chariot of Wisdom). Needless to say, many of them have deep mystical thoughts. He was also deeply impressed by the October Revolution of 1918 and was ecstatic at the downfall of the Tsar. His deep involvement with the freedom struggle and literary activities probably precluded the use of drugs.

It is very interesting to note that he cultivated a deep relationship with a mystic of the area known by the diminutive “Samiyar” (Godman):

“I praise my spiritual teacher; He is all and omnipotent; Because of his blessing birth passed off and immortality surrounded us; He showed us the power of Sakthi, the nature of wisdom and gave us clarity of mind; He made us realise how to touch Heaven while being here and saved us; I praise his lotus feet!”

The discussions between the two were highly mystical:

One day Bharathi jokingly asked him “Why are you begging? Why don’t you do some work for a living?” He replied “I am doing the work of a washerman - I put donkeys called the five senses to graze and wash the dirty clothes called mind.”

Both of them were frequent users of opium and most likely ganja too:

“[The samiar] used to lie beside the street, roll on the sand, fight with dogs, drink toddy and smoke opium.”

It is worth mentioning that these two drugs have been used by Indian mystics for the past few millenia. The writings of the famous 18 Tamil Siddhars are replete with references to these.

GANJA POET

Bharathi was mockingly referred to as the “ganja poet” by his dissenters during his lifetime as many of them were aware of his partiality to it. His eccentric looks with an oversized moustache and turban – an uncharacteristic appearance for a Brahmin (which he was) – gave credence to their disdain. His habit of walking in the streets of the agraharam in his native town holding hands with his wife and exuberantly singing his songs shocked the orthodoxy of the place.

DRUG USE IMPAIRING PHYSICAL AND (?) MENTAL HEALTH

The last 3 years of Bharathi's life were spent in Madras (1918–1921). His disillusionment with the political environment was painful. Mahatma Gandhi's ascendance in the national struggle advocating non-violence, passive non-cooperation and the notion of Satyagraha along with the eclipse of the popularity of Bharathi's idol Tilak in the oncoming struggle against the Rowlatt Act further demoralized him. Similar ideas were cropping up in his close friend V. O. C.'s mind, which eventually led him away from the national struggle.

The use of opium had increased enormously as V. O. C. described. Bharathi came along with Kullasamy the Samiyar to Madras and V. O. C. sorrowfully noticed that Bharathi's eyes were sunken and he was very lean. There was no lustre in his eyes and no freshness in his face. His speech was also a little strange. V. O. C. noticed later that Bharathi and the Samiyar took an electuary the size of a lemon from a tin box and consumed it, after which their speech became even more louder and their activities increased. Upon being asked as to what it was, Bharathi said “This rare medicine will take me to heaven.” The following day too he noticed them do the same. He realized then that this electuary (opium) was the reason for the changes in the body and the decrepit appearance of his friend.

Another great friend and co-patriot Mandayam Sreenivasacharya also noted these disturbing features and the fast-deteriorating physical health of Bharathi during the last 3 years before his death. Another reliable biographer of Bharathi, Va. Ra., a close associate during his stay in Pondicherry, mentions that Bharathi, who had discontinued opium use for some time, resumed it in 1911. On one of his visits to Bharathi's Pondicherry residence, he was offered a few nutmegs that Bharathi was consuming; to his horror, Bharathi sent a servant on an errand to get an opium electuary using the streetname “Samakirai” (midnight medicine). Va. Ra.'s admiration, loyalty and devotion prevented him offering any advice to his mentor.

Bharathi's financial condition was in tatters and he appealed to the Raja of Ettayapuram for help. A great disappointment awaited him – there was no response from the Raja who did not want the ruling British authorities to be displeased with him:

“Mind is not clear - no strength in the body as there is no strength in the mind; No way appears and what am I to do? Why am I born in this poor country?”

In the month of July 1921, he went to the Triplicane Parthasarathy temple and offered a coconut to the temple elephant, which was in a state of musth – due to which its legs were fettered and it was enclosed in a pen. When Bharathi entered the enclosure, the enraged animal took him in his trunk and threw him under it. An emboldened admirer immediately brought him out and his wounds were dressed. The greatly shocked poet recovered from his wounds and suffered a serious dysenteric attack, but he refused to take

medication and died on the 21st of September 1921. A few friends in the locality arranged the funeral. It is to be regretted that none of the politicians who became famous in subsequent times of free India paid their last respects to the greatest patriot poet of the 20th century Tamil Nadu.

It is a matter of conjecture that the poor physical health and deep depression brought about by the intemperate use of opium led to this seemingly irrational behavior and untimely death.

DISCUSSION

Opium abuse has a long history and plagued various nations over the millenia. Raw opium and its medical preparations were abused extensively, compelling the British Government of India to enact legislations such as the Opium Act of 1857, the Opium Act of 1878 and the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1930.[2–4] Presently, the drugs are controlled by the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act of 1985.[5] The drug scenario of opium misuse has changed considerably in recent times;[6–8] the phenanthrene alkaloids morphine, codeine and the morphine derivative heroin and the synthetic opioids pethidine and buprenorphine have taken the place of natural opium. According to the 2002 Indian survey, there were 3 million opioid addicts in the country.[9] Another study in Madhya Pradesh in 1996 put the figure for opium users at nearly 2%.[10]

Opium misuse among poets and artists is not uncommon. Jamison refers to the experience of Samuel Taylor Coleridge;[11] Andreasen feels that when Coleridge wrote his famous *Kubla Khan: Or, A Vision In A Dream*, he was under the influence of Laudanum – a tincture of opium.[12] It is a pity that the drug habit of Bharathi killed him prematurely in his 39th year, before his vision of a free and prosperous India could be realized. It is sad to recall that the famous Nagaswaram Vidvan Rajaratnam Pillai who ushered in the freedom of India with his magical notes on the midnight of the 15th of August 1947 also died prematurely due to his alcoholism. There are too many similar examples that need not be recounted here. It is high time that the public should take notice of such negative lifestyles in creative artists who should be advised appropriately. This is probably an unfulfilled vision of mine!

Notes

The greatness of poet Bharathi was not adequately recognized during his lifetime. The value of his role as a freedom fighter and that of his contributions to the Tamil literature have grown enormously in the decades since Independence. The use of drugs by him has not been documented properly. The eyewitness accounts of his contemporaries, fellow freedom fighters and true admirers – (all written in Tamil) V. O. C. Pillai, V. Ramaswamy (popularly known as Va. Ra.) and Mandayam Sreenivasacharya – were used in preparing this article. There is also a short biography by Bharathi's wife, Chellamma Bharathi. The Siddha preparation for rejuvenation, Puranathi lehiyam, is an ancient preparation attributed to the sage Agasthiyar, the traditional founder of the Siddha system of medicine. It contains marked amounts of cannabis, nutmeg and poppy seed.

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